Centre for Multicultural Youth Submission
to the

Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

The Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) is a community-based organisation that advocates for the needs of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. In supporting young people, CMY combines policy development and direct service delivery within a community development framework. This approach gives CMY strong connections with young people and their communities while enabling change on a local, state and national level.

The focus of our submission is on newly arrived young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and the factors impacting on their participation rates in higher education. For refugee and migrant young people, geographical determinants are compounded by other social, cultural and economic factors related to refugee and settlement experiences, all of which impact on educational aspirations, participation rates and outcomes.

1. Overview of relevant CMY Programs relating to education and training

1.1 Reconnect Program

Reconnect Young Refugees is a federally-funded initiative providing support to newly arrived (who have been in Australia less than 5 years) and refugee young people aged 12-18 who are experiencing difficulty at home, school or in their community. The program covers the Local Government Areas of Greater Dandenong, Brimbank and Hume. It supports families to talk about their needs and develop strategies to assist young people to be more connected with their family, school, friends, and community.

Assistance provided to young people and families include:

- Personal support - someone to talk to;
- Practical help e.g. filling in Centrelink forms, enrolling in study, or getting to appointments;
- Pathways to resolving conflict with family, friends, or school and help to access family mediation if desired;
- Advocacy with other services;
- Information about options or issues of concern;
- Support to link in with other services.

The Reconnect Young Refugees program commenced in 1997 and has, on average per year, provided support to 70 young people and their families.

1.2 Newly Arrived Youth Support Service

The Newly Arrived Youth Support Service (NAYSS) is a federally-funded initiative that provides culturally appropriate early intervention and transition support to newly arrived young people aged 12 to 21. The program covers the Local Government Areas of Moonee Valley, Brimbank, Hume, Greater Dandenong and Casey. Combining direct service provision with

In 2006-07, CMY's Reconnect and NAYSS programs supported over 240 young people from 32 different countries and who spoke over 45 different languages. Almost half of the young people assisted had been in Australia less than 2 years.

Based on the emerging themes identified through direct service provision, the following were identified in 2006-07 as issues requiring specific attention:

- Instances of racism in schools affecting the capacity of students to integrate; some schools lacked an understanding of needs of newly arrived students;
- Need for study support, tutoring, and mentor support as significant numbers of students had long periods of interrupted education and, in some cases, no prior education. This is particularly the case as there has been a growing cohort of young people settling in Victoria are from rural communities (e.g. Burundi, Congo, Sierra Leone);
- Homelessness amongst newly arrived and refugee young people;
- Significant numbers of young women presenting with issues relating to pregnancy, sexual health, homelessness, domestic violence and the basic need for parenting skills.
community development strategies, NAYSS supports young people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, to improve their level of engagement with family, education, training, work and the community. It incorporates action research with family-centred approaches and culturally responsive service delivery that utilises a variety of approaches such as case management, counselling, group work, family mediation and practical support.

The NAYSS Program commenced in 2005 and has, on average per year, provided support to 180 young people and their families.

As well as operating in Melbourne's southeast and northwest, CMY is also funded as the Lead Provider within the national NAYSS initiative. As Lead Provider, CMY provides information, services and resources to NAYSS providers around Australia, facilitating professional development across services. We also link providers to enhance peer communication and support within the program.

### 1.3 Out of School Hours Learning Support Program

The Out of School Hours Learning Support Program (OSHLSP) evolved from CMY's involvement in the Refugee Education Partnership Project (REPP). The OSHLS Program supports Homework Support Groups with training, consultation, support and resourcing.

The Program is funded by State Government to resource and coordinate out of school hours learning support programs across Victoria. The out of school hours learning support programs or homework clubs assist migrant and refugee young people with their studies and includes a component of social activities. It provides the additional support that these young people require to manage the school curriculum. The UK model of learning support programs for refugee and migrant young people has demonstrated the effectiveness of these programs in assisting young people and improving their participation rate in schools.

### 1.4 UCan2 Project

Ucan2 was established provides educational case management, social support and group mentoring in partnership with CMY, Foundation House and AMES. The objectives of the Ucan2 program are:

1. to increase education, training and employment opportunities for young refugees in the first 15 months of the resettlement, recovery and integration processes, and
2. to increase the level of cooperation between providers of education, social support, training and employment services working with young people from refugee backgrounds in the 16 to 24 year age group.

Ucan2 commenced in September 2007 and is funded through a private trust.

### 1.5 Mentoring/Leadership programs

CMY delivers just over 10 different types of mentoring and leadership initiatives with migrant and refugee young people. The diverse range of programs cover personal development, professional (employment related) development, mentoring by the corporate sector and decision makers in government, leadership projects developed and led by young people and peer support and mentoring. The overall aim of these programs is to provide the environment and support for young people to grow in confidence and develop the skills to actively participate in the social, economic and political life of Victoria. This area of work has grown rapidly in the last few years and has been enthusiastically embraced young people.

### 1.6 Policy and Research

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[1] The Refugee Education Partnership Project (2004-2007) sought to establish a more coordinated system across community, education and government sectors to improve the well-being and educational outcomes of students from refugee background. REPP focused on resourcing Out of School Hours Learning Support Programs, provided refugee support in schools, and policy and cross-sectoral coordination. The partnership supporting the project consisted of CMY, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Debney Park Secondary College, the Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development, VicHealth, the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, and a private philanthropic trust.
CMY’s policy and research work is wide-ranging and diverse. It includes advice to government, resource development, research, information provision to workers, and media commentary on issues affecting young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

The following are some of the resources and reports CMY has produced in relation to education and training needs of refugee young people:

Pathways and Pitfalls: Refugee young people in and around the education system in Greater Dandenong (CMYL-Sellen, 2004)

Settling In: Exploring Good Settlement for Refugee Young People in Australia (CMYI, 2006)

Late Arrivals: The needs of refugee young people who resettle in later adolescence (CMYI, 2006)


2. Background to Refugee Young People in Victoria

2.1 Demographics

In 2006/07, 74% of Australia’s 12,747 Humanitarian entrants were under the age of 30 at the time of their arrival. Of the 3,673 Humanitarian entrants to Victoria in the same year, 32% were aged 12-24. The Victorian LGAs with the highest settlement of humanitarian entrants tend to be in the outer metropolitan fringe areas of Greater Melbourne, where affordable housing, employment opportunities and the existence of established migrant services are all attracting factors. Figure 1 shows the Top 10 settlement locations for refugee young people.

Figure 1. Top 10 LGAs in Greater Melbourne for settlement of young Humanitarian entrants (13-25 year olds), 2003-04 to 2007-08

(Source: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Settlement Database)
Young people settling in Australia through the Humanitarian Program come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. In recent years, young people from Sudan, Burma, Afghanistan and Iraq have represented the largest components of the Humanitarian program for the age group 13-25, although there have been significant shifts in source countries reflecting the governments' changing regional priorities (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Top 10 Countries of Birth for Humanitarian Youth Entrants to Victoria, 2002/03 – 2006/07](image)

(Source: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Settlement Database)

2.2 The refugee experience: Context to young people's participation in higher education

While there is no standard 'refugee experience', refugees have, by definition, been forced to flee their country of origin because of war or persecution. Many refugee young people have come to Australia with their immediate or extended family, and others have come as unaccompanied minors or with non-parent carers, such as siblings. Some young people who arrive in Australia through other migration programs (such as family migration) come from refugee source countries and may have also experienced persecution or periods spent in refugee camps.

Many refugee young people and their families have experienced some or all of the following:

- Forced departure from their country of origin;
- Conflict, organised violence and human rights abuses; and
- A dangerous escape from their country of origin, travelling long distances, sometimes by foot and in cramped conditions.

For young people who are refugees or newly arrived in Australia, the developmental tasks of adolescence are compounded by the traumatic nature of the refugee experience, cultural dislocation, loss of established social networks and the practical demands of resettlement. Refugee young people must negotiate complex education and employment pathways (many with a history of disrupted or no formal education), a new

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2 Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council (2002). Strategy for Refugee Young People. Canberra, Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs

3 Ibid
language and culture, make new friends, and navigate unfamiliar and complex social systems (such as Centrelink, Australian laws, public transport), while also managing individual, family and community expectations.

Despite the immense difficulty of resettlement and recovery, refugee young people often make remarkable progress and bring a wealth of resources and strengths to the Australian community. The refugee experience can bring about qualities such as:

- Resilience and resourcefulness;
- Adaptability;
- Strong commitment to the family and the value of community;
- Multilingual skills;
- Awareness of many cultures and communities; and
- Strong desire to achieve educationally.

When they are well supported in the transition to life in Australia, refugee young people have often demonstrated their strong capacity to rebuild their lives, achieve their goals and contribute dynamically to the broader community.

3. Experiences of refugee young people in accessing higher education

The Australian education system is built on a linear pathway model in which each phase is predicated on the last and where compulsory education and training are designed for students who have completed all or most of secondary schooling. Older adolescents from refugee backgrounds often find this system challenging due to their past experiences of interrupted schooling, lack of English language and unfamiliarity with educational and training pathways. A key issue for many youth is the necessity of entering the mainstream school system after only 12 months in a specialised English language centre. Transition to mainstream schooling commonly leads to a range of problems for refugee youth as demonstrated by drop out rates, disengagement from the mainstream (participating in social, sporting and arts based contexts), and welfare dependency. (Ucan2 Evaluation Report, Leahy & Gifford 2008)

3.2 Interrupted pathways

Many young people who have settled in Australia through the humanitarian program have had a history of disrupted education. Young people who have spent years in refugee camps or fleeing from place to place may have had extremely limited or no access to formal education. Thus, the pathways for these young people into higher education are not only about English language acquisition, but about acquiring the necessary learning skills needed to meet the expectations of Australia's education and training systems.

For example, Figure 3 shows the variance in number of years of formal education of Humanitarian entrants of all ages who settled in Victoria in 2007/08.
3.3 Aspirations

Despite (or perhaps, because of) their pre-settlement experiences, migrant and refugee young people often have very high aspirations in terms of education and employment. The young people CMY has consulted identify a wide range of career aspirations – from becoming doctors and lawyers, to hotel managers, journalists, auto mechanics and community workers – and many articulate a strong sense of wanting to take every opportunity Australia has to offer to learn, succeed and be able to ‘give back’ to those who have helped them on their journey, both in Australia and overseas.

Those young people who were less clear and less optimistic about their education and career goals were those who had become frustrated in their endeavours to navigate education, training and employment pathways:

“I don’t know what I want to study now. I seem to have lost my focus through lack of success.”
- Young man, Ethiopian

“I am sick of struggling as an African. It’s hard to study and work.”
- Young man, Sudanese

3.4 Family expectations

Some young people talked about the lack of adult role models from their own communities working in the careers or workplaces where they aspired to work. Instead, young people saw adults from their community working only in less skilled jobs that reinforce the stereotypes that they reject, even though these adults may hold Australian higher education qualifications. Other young people are acutely aware of the high (and sometimes unrealistic) education and employment expectations and aspirations their parents/families have for them:

“We feel upset with ourselves. When we were in Thailand we had to run from the enemy. In Australia we cannot perform our parents dream. Our parents had no education. There is a lot of pressure for us to get a university degree.”
- Young man, Karen (Burmese)

3.5 Stereotyping

Many young people from refugee backgrounds feel stereotyped through being streamed into vocational education (VCAL/VET). Whilst these pathways may be appropriate for some young people, others felt like they were ‘written off’ and not offered options outside the ‘trades’. Many young people acknowledge that it
is a long and convoluted path they need to take in order to achieve their career goals (e.g. undertaking bridging courses, or starting a higher education course that is not their preference, in order to transfer to their preferred option at a later stage). Many young people are frustrated by the lack of accessible or targeted courses that meet both aspirations and education levels.

4. **Factors impacting on education participation, particularly higher education**

For any young person living in an outer metropolitan fringe area, there are geographical dimensions to their participation in (higher) education, including issues around public transport cost and availability, the time and distance required to travel to access education, and the range of education options available. Alongside these, there are additional social, economic and cultural factors impacting on whether newly arrived and refugee young people are able to participate in higher education. These include:

4.1 **Language difficulties**

Beyond initial English language learning (through the ESL New Arrivals Program and AMEP), there is a need for young people to be able to access ongoing support with academic English in order to pursue and stay in higher education. The continuing low levels of English language and literacy are a significant barrier to completing school, undertaking further education and gaining employment.

4.2 **Disrupted education**

The maximum of 910 hours of on-arrival English tuition (through AMEP/SPP) is not sufficient for those with low level literacy, pre-literacy and disrupted education to be able to transition into mainstream education. There is a need for age-appropriate and targeted programs that newly arrived refugee young people who wish to continue into higher education can access in order to develop the necessary language and learning skills.

A compounding problem is the lack of appropriate tools for assessing normal language development for a young person with disrupted education, and learning/intellectual disabilities. For example, some young people are assessed as having a learning/intellectual disability when in fact their disrupted education is more likely to be the cause of their learning difficulties. Alternatively, some young people are not assessed for learning/intellectual disabilities because it is assumed that their lack of progress is to do with disrupted education. Developing assessment tools that help to identify learning/intellectual disabilities for new arrivals from non-English speaking backgrounds would assist in ensuring young people receive the appropriate support they require to be able to continue in education.

4.3 **Complex settlement issues**

Newly arrived and refugee young people often need time, flexibility and support to be able to juggle higher education as well as the other things going on in their lives related to resettlement (e.g. issues to do with housing, family conflict, and understanding services and systems). A lack of appropriate support services for refugee students in higher education may be a barrier for these young people remaining in education.

4.4 **Cost of education**

For young people, decisions around participating in higher education, employment or a combination of both will be influenced by the financial costs of education. For refugee young people, the additional costs of settlement and rebuilding a new life in Australia must also be factored in. For refugee young people with English as a second language, completing the study requirements at TAFE or University often takes much more time than that taken by their native-English-speaking peers, leaving less time for part-time work. Hence, without financial assistance, juggling part-time employment and study may not be a viable option.

4.5 **Early intervention in schools**

The level of support provided to refugee young people within the school system will have a direct impact on their pathway to participation in higher education. Where schools have good connections with early intervention support services, difficulties faced by young people are more likely to be picked up early and addressed as they arise. Unfortunately, CMY’s experience is that sometimes schools find it easier to expel young people with complex needs, rather than support them.
4.6 Pathways from AMEP into higher education

For young people who settle in Australia in the older age group (16-25 years), there are limited pathways to higher education after they complete their entitlement of 510 hours of ESL through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). There is a need to provide access to opportunities for ongoing English language learning and skill development.

The Federal Government has recently released a discussion paper as part of its review of Adult Migrant English Program. The discussion paper outlines a range of options for future directions in the delivery of AMEP. It recognises that young adults (15 to 18 years) have particular needs and is considering a range of flexible options for this target group. CMY is encouraged by this consideration and will submit a response to the paper to reinforce the range of flexible options proposed to ensure that programs like the AMEP complement other educational services to assist refugee young people.

4.7 Family/community understanding of the Australian education system

In order for parents/guardians to be able to guide and support their young people to make decisions around post-compulsory and higher education, there needs to be more targeted approaches to engage and inform newly arrived communities about the education system and culture in Australia. Without this information, parents/guardians are often not aware of the range of education and employment options available in Australia, and the requirements needed for a particular pathway.

Case Study

"Sam" was a refugee from Sudan who had spent about 4 years in a refugee camp in Kenya. She subsequently entered Australia with her family under the Humanitarian Program. She had very limited and disrupted schooling and was enrolled at the English Language School. On completion, the Careers Pathways teacher directed her to enrol in an English language bridging course at the local TAFE. However, Sam felt she wanted to go to high school like other young people her age. In the meantime, due to significant family conflict, Sam left home. The CMY youth support worker who had been working with Sam ever since she was enrolled at the English Language School, mediated in the conflict and found an accommodation alternative with Sam's extended family members. The youth support worker also advocated for her to enter a High School. She helped Sam to look for a local school and supported and advocated for her entry into the school.

The school conducted a thorough assessment of Sam's needs and together with the youth worker, drew up a case management plan. In recognising the level of Sam's education needs, the school demonstrated flexibility by allowing her to do VCE over three years. The school also agreed to enrol her using her birth certificate age (19 years as opposed to 15 years as stated in her visa) so that she could be with young people in her age range. The school had an ESL unit for overseas exchange students which they allowed Sam to do this as one of her subjects. They also worked closely with the youth support worker to identify subjects that Sam would enjoy and do well at. The school continues to contact CMY youth support worker for information and advice.

5. Strategies to assist refugee and migrant young people to access and participate in higher education

5.1 Data collection

The development of effective policy requires data about refugee young people's participation rates in higher education, disaggregated by age and visa type. Data that tracks refugee and humanitarian entrant students while in education and training programs should be collected and made accessible to a range of key stakeholders.

5.2 Community-based programs that support refugee and migrant young people in education

Recognising the range of challenges that refugee/migrant young people are likely to face, it is important that appropriate community-based services are developed and linked to support young people through their educational pathways. For example, there is a need to extend learning support programs to assist young
people at a school and higher education level with tutoring, language support, study skills, as well as broader social support.

UCan2 is another example of how community-based programs can support young people to juggle both employment and study, recognising the financial pressures that newly arrived young people face during settlement as well as the strong desire to pursue education. (See 1.4 for details of UCan2)

Another excellent model for ensuring that young people from newly arrived and refugee backgrounds are supported to pursue education, is the Newly Arrived Youth Support Service (NAYSS). An important development in the NAYSS program would be to increase the target age range from 12 - 21 to include 22-25 year olds, thus ensuring young people from refugee and newly arrived backgrounds who are in higher education are provided with the relevant support needed to continue onto higher education.

5.3 Targeted, flexible pathways to higher education

Develop flexible and targeted bridging programs that provide a graduated transition into mainstream education. For example, allowing young people to undertake VCE over three years with ESL units.

Also, enhance the flexibility and transportability of AMEP/NAP ESL ‘learning hours’ specifically through:

a) Varying the conditions on on-arrival ESL study so that eligible students can transfer study entitlements from the school-based New Arrivals Program to the AMEP or from the AMEP to the school-based New Arrivals Program up to twice within the first six months after registration.

b) Developing within the existing on-arrival ESL study entitlements a youth-specific ‘voucher’ system or ‘bank of learning hours’ that can be drawn upon as required by 15-25 year old eligible students.

Reduce the pressure for premature transition from education to work for eligible refugee and humanitarian ESL students and job seekers by applying the option to extend the exemption to the Activity Test requirements for receiving Centrelink income support benefits. This will enable ESL students and job seekers to fulfill their participation requirements whilst developing their English language proficiency through approved study.

5.4 Early intervention support in schools

Early intervention implies identifying and addressing some of the barriers to higher education that may be faced by refugee young people (for example, family conflict and housing issues). Unless dealt with, these issues will impede academic success. In addressing these issues, schools and agencies must link and work together through complex cases.

To facilitate these linkages and responsibilities, assessment tools should be developed and used by schools and higher education providers. These assessment tools should also assess learning/intellectual disabilities among new arrivals from non-English speaking backgrounds and ensure young people with disabilities receive the appropriate support required to continue with their education.

5.5 Student Support Services in Higher Education

Ensure that student services in TAFE and Universities are appropriately supported and resourced to provide holistic services that are reflective of the diversity and needs of the student body, including newly arrived and refugee young people. As these services can often be the immediate point of contact for tertiary students, it is critical that they are responsive and able to provide support and referral for young people on financial issues, housing, social connection, community-based support programs and learning disabilities.

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